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ABSTRACT

The improvement and standardization of quality Title I evaluations at the local, state and federal levels is the intent underlying the development and dissemination of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Title I Evaluation and Reporting System. Even if the current suggested procedures were technically perfect, implementation of any decentralized reporting system in the almost 14,000 school districts receiving Title I funds could be expected to lead to new issues that would have profound implications for the quality of the data gathered. Many such issues have already arisen, including, for example, minimization of reporting burdens, for local and state agencies; control of the quality of arithmetic operations required (especially score conversions for out-of-level tests): facilitation of school district commitment to quality evaluations; and concern that the developmental resources needed to implement a new system would delay states' current reporting requirements. This paper discusses these issues in the context of two approaches to quality control: (1) training of local staff by technical assistance centers and state education agencies; and (2) using the computer to collect and process test data. (Author/GDC)

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Region VII Technical Assistance Center

TITLE I, ESEA DISCUSSION PAPER

Quality Control Issues in the Implementation of the RMC Title I Models

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Abstract

The improvement and standardization of quality Title I evaluations at the local, state and federal levels was and is the intent underlying the development and dissemination of the ESEA Title I Evaluation and Reporting System. Even if the current suggested procedures were technically perfect, implementation of any decentralized reporting system in the almost 14,000 school districts receiving Title I funds could be expected to lead to new issues that would have profound implications for the quality of the data gathered. Many such issues have already arisen, including, for example, minimization of LEA/SEA reporting burdens, control of the quality of arithmetic operations required (especially score conversions for out-of-level tests), facilitation of LEA commitment to quality evaluations, and concern that the developmental time/resources needed to implement a new system would delay an SEA's current reporting requirements. This paper discusses these and other issues and how they relate to the development of quality data and sound evaluation practices in the nation's largest educational program, ESEA Title I.

QUALITY CONTROL ISSUES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RMC TITLE I MODELS

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Introduction

The recently-proposed USOE Title I Evaluation and Reporting System is itself a response of the Congress and the U.S. Office of Education (USOE) to their concern over the quality of data on Title I obtained from state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs). Certainly the use of evaluation data for decisionmaking or for any other purpose, at the local, state and federal levels, is based upon the assumption that the data reflect reality in some reasonably accurate if not systematic fashion. Although there are a number of different categories of quality control issues (e.g., technical issues such as whether or not different models and/or different test batteries really do provide comparable and aggregatable estimates of Title I treatment effects), this paper will primarily discuss only one such class of issues -- those related to the actual implementation of the models by LEA and SEA staff.

Overview of Issues and This Paper's Perspective

As noted previously, the improvement and standardization of quality Title I evaluations at the local, state and federal levels seems to be the intent underlying the development and dissemination of the Title I Evaluation and Reporting System. However, I believe it is extremely important to recognize that the implementation of any decentralized reporting system in the almost 14,000 school districts receiving Title I funds will lead to usable, useful results only if there is a commitment to the generation of quality evaluation data at the LEA level. Issues surrounding LEA staff involvement in and attitudes toward the evaluation system, as well as similar motivational factors among SEA staff, suggest the presence of an entirely different "system" which must be considered by USOE and by TACs. It is not a technical system; it is a system comprised of people.

Its key components are not technical or procedural issues such as proper testing dates, use of test batteries with adequate empirically-based national norms, or administration of an evaluation test that measures project objectives. Rather, this other system's key factors are distinctly human concerns such as minimization of reporting burden, utility of results and motivation to generate quality evaluations and data. As the Title I Evaluation and Reporting System is adopted in more and more SEAs and LEAs, factors related to the attitudes, limitations and strengths of the individuals producing the data will undoubtedly become increasingly important.

This paper's perspective regarding quality control is based upon concerns with which the author has become familiar during his tenure as a staff member of the Title I Technical Assistance Center (TAC) serving HEW Region VII (Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska and Kansas). The conceptual framework pervading the presentation assumes that

- Most LEA staff are busy people who want to spend as much of their time as possible providing direct services to children. Such persons undoubtedly would prefer to allocate to formal evaluation reporting activities only as much time as absolutely needed.

- Human beings will probably make clerical errors in reporting data. The frequency with which such errors occur is inversely related (1) to the time available for such duties and (2) to the perceived importance of the accuracy of the data by the individuals involved.

Discussion

RMC, the developer of the proposed reporting system, devised the original version of the system given the belief that LEA staff could and would provide accurate evaluation data if only any complex computations needed could be broken down into a series of small but clearly defined steps. Other contractors probably would have made the same assumption in developing such materials. Experience with actual implementation of the system in the field, however, has shown rather convincingly that this assumption is not necessarily justified. Thus, since the results of the review of the data provided by the 40 pilot LEAs in Iowa were disseminated among the TAC Directors, "quality control" has become one of the most widely discussed

implementation issues (only rivaled by the necessity of making evaluation findings useful at the local level).

To my knowledge, there are really only two conceptually different approaches to the improvement in the quality of Title I data being collected and reported to the SEA by each of its LEAs. The first approach and the one that I believe was the reason TACs were originally created is the training approach. This approach also assumes that with simple step-by-step forms/instructions and with workshop and other advisory services provided by the TACs/SEAs, LEA staff will be able to implement proper evaluations, collect and compile clean data, and report valid findings (aggregated to the grade and/or project level) to the SEA. Similarly, the SEA should then be able to aggregate the LEA data and produce a sound, high quality report, the findings contained therein being aggregatable with those from other SEAs.

There is little doubt, at least in my mind, that the training model or approach is responsible for dramatic improvements in evaluation practices at the SEA and LEA levels. But, for the moment, let me focus on model implementation at the LEA level and limit my discussion to use of Model A1 in Region VII alone. What exactly are things like in the majority of LEAs in the region (i.e., in small and in very small LEAs which altogether do not necessarily serve a majority of the Title I students in a given state)? Can we expect them to implement Model A1 correctly and then report accurate test score results? (For purposes of this particular discussion we shall also limit ourselves to the impact data and other data that needs to be reported along with it.)

My answer is that given the conditions existing in a majority of LEAs in Region VII (excluding most of the large LEAs) it is not reasonable to assume that proper implementation of Model A1 evaluations and that accurate test score data (and program attribute data) will occur with the training model approach. Steve Horwitz (Region I TAC) has found that the data reported by LEAs receiving TAC/SEA training did contain some errors; however, the data from LEAs receiving no training "always" had errors. Assuming a TAC or a SEA could reach all the right people in our Region VII LEAs, it seems reasonable to assume that such a result would also occur. However, workshops are not always attended by the right people (e.g., by the individuals who schedule testing). Furthermore, it is apparent that most LEAs in the region have very little resources in the way of administration

(which would include evaluation) and that the major burden of reporting probably falls on those very same persons who are shouldering the burden for implementing the project itself--the teachers. For example, in one LEA having a full-time Title I director, there are very little resources that can be called upon to collect and compile Title I data because the district has a firm policy (and one that is in fact implemented) that almost all available money be allocated to direct services or materials for students. Such a policy results in a project containing very little supervisory, administrative or evaluation resources. The point I am making is that doing anything special--like taking the time to find out exactly what test should be used for Title I evaluation purposes, when exactly should tests be given, inspecting non-existent distributions of raw scores for floor/ceiling effects, using extreme care and double checking all test score transformations--becomes a big deal! Given the fairly common attitude that Title I evaluation is primarily useful only for fulfilling a reporting requirement, it doesn't seem likely that teachers will be highly motivated to provide high quality data, especially when to do so may interfere with their classroom activities and is done on their own time.

Because most Region VII LEAs have small Title I projects and/or because little resources are generally available for evaluation, I have been led to the conclusion that high quality data and accurate implementation of Model A1 in the region can be achieved gradually if (1) an intuitively meaningful procedure to teachers is used (such as pretesting at the beginning of the school year and posttesting at the end), (2) the same procedures are used year-after-year so that practices, etc. become habitual, (3) LEAs and teachers receive some form of regular feedback on the impact of <u>their</u> Title I programs and on how to interpret such findings so that they know their data is not going on a shelf somewhere and so that they can have such findings available to stimulate [if not provoke] discussion/interaction/action concerning possible changes in curricula, materials, tests, etc., and (4) SEAs receive some form of regular feedback on how their evaluation practices might be improved so as to increase the precision/validity of the findings and to ensure that good evaluation habits are acquired.

Some SEA decision makers in Region VII believe that if evaluations are implemented every three years it will be very difficult for high quality evaluations to be achieved on any regular basis from small LEAs. Given the rate of teacher turn-over and the fact that the last data collected from an LEA may be two years old, it seems to me that developing good evaluation habits, encouraging a positive attitude toward evaluation and actual use of evaluation findings to make or stimulate programmatic decisions at the LEA level will not be achieved on a widespread basis.

In review, although the training model approach is conceptually a good idea, I believe it fails to take into account the lack of resources/time available in many LEAs for such activities. Furthermore, most SEA and LEA staff believe that Title I exists (or should exist) not as something to be evaluated but as a service program for children. Evaluation should provide a service to the implementers of the program and should, if at all possible, minimize the amount of resources diverted from direct services to evaluation data reporting. Decision makers in Region VII do in fact espouse this philosophy--that evaluation is a service and not an end-in-and-of-itself. It is thus the responsibility of the SEA and the TAC to facilitate the best evaluations which can be implemented but which require the least amount of time on the part of LEA staff (especially those who are implementers of direct services to program participants).

This leads me to the second basic approach which can be used to improve the quality of evaluation data. This approach, for lack of a specific descriptive label, I call the data systems approach. The basic assumption underlying this approach is that the operations required to implement the Title I reporting system should consider (1) the resources available to LEAs, (2) the capabilities of LEA staff and (3) the capabilities of high speed computers and appropriate software. The objective of such a system is to permit procedures which make the most efficient use of human resources and uses those resources only for activities that are fairly likely to be done correctly. Another way of describing the philosophy underlying this approach, which has been implemented to varying degrees in Region VII, is "let's minimize the evaluation reporting burden on teachers and LEAs

and let the computer do the drudgery." Hopefully, the result is an increase in the accuracy of the data and an improvement in its cost-effectiveness.

This basic orientation was the essential reason the Region VII TAC encouraged and/or agreed to the collection-of-raw-scores-approach used in Iowa during FY 1978. Experience with the approach has yielded what is believed to be very accurate test score data simply because the majority of scores came from hand-scored tests and because it seems reasonable to assume that such scoring is done accurately by teachers. Since information on testing dates and other procedural practices was also reported, other potential advantages of such a data system are that information on LEA gains and on the extent to which evaluation procedures were adequately followed could be supplied to the LEA by the SEA. Perhaps one of the best examples of an SEA supplying LEAs with such feedback is in Missouri where a special series of computer programs, tailored to their particular method of Title I data reporting (individual student percentile rank scores on optical scan sheets), are used to report LEA evaluation findings as well as a complete listing of possible Model A1 evaluation errors/hazards.

Another advantage of the "data systems" approach to quality control is that the resulting data set is available to the SEA for its own reporting and evaluation requirements. Analyses of errors can be easily conducted so that the content of evaluation workshops can focus on those procedures which are most often implemented incorrectly. Similarly, presence/absence of errors can be related to other factors such as estimated gains or project characteristics. Unusually effective and unusually ineffective projects can be easily identified for special help from SEA staff. Such a set of data can also be especially useful for methodological analyses--e.g., an assessment of whether or not gains appear to be associated with the use of certain test batteries.

Concluding Comments

It is important to note that the "data systems" approach to quality control can be individualized so that the basic reporting procedure is similar to that used in the past. For example, in past years optical scan sheets had been used in Missouri for reporting project averages. Thus, the use of such a medium for reporting individual student pretest and posttest percentile rank scores was a natural step. Feedback from LEAs to the SEA indicated that substantial savings in time were experienced in most LEAs simply because they were relieved of computational responsibilities.

Tailoring new data collection procedures in such a way also has the advantage of minimizing change over time. Since many SEAs are reticent about changes (as are LEAs), the combination of "something new and something old" can be reasonably persuasive.

In retrospect, rather than discuss quality control issues per se it would appear that this paper has focused on two apparently competing approaches to the improvement of quality, the training approach and the data systems approach. The latter approach is obviously the method of choice proposed in this paper. It must be noted, however, that the approaches are not mutually exclusive. Obviously, even if the computer does perform all the drudgery, training of LEA staff on the interpretation and use of evaluation findings is required. However, the minimization of computational burdens and the change in emphasis from reporting to interpretation/use do seem to convey to LEA staff that the SEA values their time and is interested in program impact. The combination appears to be one method by which LEA staff can be positively motivated to improve evaluation practices and program impact. Time should show whether or not this is an effective means of controlling/standardizing, on a widespread basis, the quality of Title I evaluation.